

Backcountry Management
Plan

Craters of the Moon National Monument

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(revised)

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INTRODUCTION

Craters of the Moon National Monument's "true" backcountry lies mostly, if not entirely, within the boundaries of the park's Wilderness Area which was established October 23, 1970. The wilderness zone comprises an area of approximately 43,243 acres or 67 square miles which is roughly 80 percent of the monument's total area.

Because it is a comparatively small area, a considerable distance from the larger cities and by the nature of its terrain and climate has strong attraction for only a limited number of dedicated hikers, heavy use of the area is not expected in the near future. However, time and the possibility of unforeseen changes could effectively nullify this prediction. Thus the plan includes the possibility of a substantial increase in backcountry use.

The plan shall deal primarily with the management of visitors and their activities associated with use of the backcountry. As prescribed by National Park Service policies, Craters of the Moon is committed to wise, planned management of backcountry resources. Fragile areas will be carefully managed to minimize damage and the backcountry user should understand the need to minimize his impact on the resource.

GENERAL RESOURCES DESCRIPTION

The area set aside as wilderness at Craters of the Moon lies south of the monument's developed area. Covering 43,243 acres of the Snake River Plain, it preserves approximately 9 miles of the Great Rift, a weak zone in the

earth's crust which is the cause of the spectacular geological phenomenon known as Craters of the Moon National Monument.

Literature on the monument has described it as weird and fantastic and many visitors would agree. It is an area of black cinder cones and spatter cones, lava flows, lava tubes or caves, tree molds and other manifestations of the turmoil that took place here. It is essentially a frozen landscape, the rocks stiffened in various postures which reveal the turbulence of their once molten state.

Though much of the landscape is bare rock, plants do grow in the cracks, where wind blown soil accumulates, and on the cinder cones and older lava flows, where soil is fashioned from an aggregate of weathered cinders, lava material and decayed vegetation.

The most conspicuous plant is the Limber Pine, which in moister sites precedes the climax community of sage brush, rabbit brush, antelope bitterbrush and grass. This diverse vegetation supports an equally diverse fauna. The largest animal is the mule deer though in the past a sub-species of Grizzly roamed the lavas. Antelope occasionally migrate through the monument.

The climate can best be described as arid and windy and these factors have a strong influence on the kind and character of the life that subsists here.

BACKCOUNTRY USE AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The use of the backcountry can be best described as light. Because it is one of the few areas within the National Park System that has legislated wilderness, a number of letters are received by the park each year asking for information on the wilderness. Much of the correspondence seems to indicate a misunderstanding on the part of the letter writer as to what the term wilderness means. In a number of cases, the writers ask about fishing, long distance hikes and limits on length of stay within the monument's wilderness—not understanding that the harsh terrain, hostile climate and lack of water impose severe limitations on most of the backcountry users. Because of this, all visitors who request backcountry information are fully informed as to the characteristics of Craters of the Moon's backcountry.

Backcountry overnight use continues to rise slightly each new season with ^{234 VISITOR NIGHTS} ~~102~~ overnight hikers in 1978.* Probably 98 percent of the overnighter's spend only an evening out. The single most overriding factor that probably contributes to controlling the visitor's length of stay is scarcity of water. Dehydration can come on rapidly and one must be constantly aware of this possibility.

Day use of the backcountry is low if one is to consider only those visitors whose primary purpose is to hike into the park wilderness. Only one of the two trails that enters the wilderness is adequately signed and this leads to

* 234 DAY USERS

a popular area known as the Tree Molds. The primary purpose of visitors in using this trail is to reach the tree molds area and not because the trail happens to enter designated wilderness. Thus, true use of the wilderness or backcountry as we tend to think of areas in these terms is not accurately reflected in statistics taken from the Tree Molds trail. The spring of 1976 will see a spur trail connecting the Tree Molds Trail with the main wilderness trail that follows the Great Rift and its chain of volcanic phenomena south towards the lower park boundary. This will allow for a more accurate tally of true wilderness use in the years to come. Also, new wayside exhibits at the trailhead will probably result in increased use, both dayuse and overnight.

Essentially, there are only two kinds of backcountry use within the monument—day use and overnight backpacking. Most of the hiking groups are small, ranging from 2-5 persons. A number of college or university geology groups dayhiking the area may consist of 12-15 persons. Horse use is rare and if utilized normally consists of a local group of people numbering maybe 15-20 who occasionally make a spring day ride 4-5 miles into the wilderness.

Winter use is very light to almost non-existent in the backcountry at the present time. Due to energy conservation measures and the effect inflation is having with operational costs, park roads beyond the headquarter's area are not being cleared of snow during the winter months as in past years. Because of this the visitor who skis or snowshoes must now travel a minimum

of 3-4 miles one way in order to just reach the main wilderness corridor. With the exceptional beauty and solitude of the snow-blanketed volcanic features between the headquarters and wilderness areas, there is little reason in most cases for one to have to travel further on into the wilderness to obtain a true and meaningful experience about Craters of the Moon.

Public Information

Concerted efforts will be made to educate visitors in ways to use the backcountry on a non-consumptive basis. The goal is the type of use which leaves no visible evidence of the party's visit—no fireplace, no trash, no camping structures. Signs or exhibits on trails entering the area, handouts distributed to interested visitors, and personal contact by park personnel can all contribute to the effort.

Day Use

Most of the interesting features in the backcountry are within 7 miles of a road, which means that a fair hiker can reach the bulk of them and return to his vehicle the same day. The Rift zone is particularly easy traveling as it is lined with cinder cones, rather than rough lava and is well supplied with deer trails. Because of this and because overnight use is much more disturbing to any area—especially Craters of the Moon, visitors will be encouraged to enjoy the area on a day-use basis.

Overnight Use

Visitors interested in exploring the rougher and more distant portions of the backcountry requiring overnight camps will be required to have camping permits.

Overnight use shall not be restricted to any particular site although users will be encouraged to not use the more popular camping areas. Camping locations will not be designated, but the user will be encouraged not to camp directly on or in an important natural feature.

Backcountry Patrols

Should the backcountry use increase to a point that warrants ranger patrols, then such patrols will be scheduled on a regular basis with emphasis placed on seeking maximum contact with backcountry visitors. Additional duties will include cleaning of camping areas and trails, minor repairs of signs and sanitary facilities and minor maintenance of trails.

Horse Use

Horses and pack animals can be taken from the Tree Molds Parking Area to Little Prairie and the grass community south of the Sentinel before encountering difficult lava terrain. This amounts to about a one and one half hour trip or a three hour round trip ride. Thus, there is no realistic need to use animals on an overnight basis in the Wilderness. If necessary, special regulations will be established limiting pack and riding stock to day use only. Overnight use would force heavy demands upon the few dwindling waterholes, as no other source of water is available. Other damaging effects of keeping horses overnight are unjustifiable in an area as small and accessible as the Wilderness.

Development

Trails should neither be built nor maintained in the Wilderness. The area is essentially flat and well supplied with deer trails. A constructed trail route would create channeled traveling rather than the dispersed type of use desired. At this time, campsites need not be designated nor built.

Waterholes

Many of the waterholes have either dried up or appear to be doing so. At least this has been the trend since 1920. While there appears to be no immediate danger of their complete disappearance, caution in their use is justified. Unless one has utilized the waterholes before, they are also difficult to locate and a hiker would be foolish to depend on them for his needs. If human use in the future threatens the life of these waterholes, then it might appear reasonable to seek a special regulation prohibiting their use by visitors. In the meantime, all visitors will be encouraged to pack in enough water to sustain them for the duration of their stay. The waterholes are unique natural features worthy of preservation. The small quantity of water available in them is also very important to wildlife—particularly to birds.

Fires

Wood fires are prohibited in the backcountry (for that matter, wood fires are prohibited throughout the monument, with the exception of the group campground in the north unit of the monument). Even though extensive areas of barren

lava effectively restrict range fires, the heavy use of the limited wood supply would have an adverse effect on small mammal and bird populations, would rob the landscape of soil building material and in the end would remove a very important part of the natural scene—the stately, ghost-like, tree snag. If cooking fires are required by backpackers, they will be done on chemical stoves.

Sanitation

As an overall policy, everything packed in must be packed out. Proper sanitation requires that human waste be disposed of in cinder fields and at least one hundred yards away from any water source. Should visitor use increase to the point that sanitation facilities are required such as pit toilets, the Forest Service Wallawa-type toilet is recommended as the most efficient and compatible to the backcountry scene. Garbage pits will not be provided or allowed in the backcountry.

Signing

Signs in the backcountry will be few and simple in design and text. Destination signs will be placed only at trailheads and trail junctions. Because of the lack of trails that run any great distance, no mileages will be placed on signs for destinations less than one mile.

Signs and posts will be constructed of unpainted wood with routed and burned-in one inch Gothic capital letters. Posts will be firmly implanted at least 24 inches deep. Base of sign or text will not be more than 24 inches above ground level. Signs will not be attached to trees, rocks or any other natural features.

Visitor Use Statistics

Trail registers will be provided at the wilderness boundaries to record visitor use. In addition, the camping permits required of all overnight users will give a fairly accurate record of this type of use.

Search and Rescue

Due to past statistics on search and rescue operations and the light use of the monument's backcountry, it is felt that a search and rescue plan per se is not a necessity at this time at Craters of the Moon. Having proprietary jurisdiction, the park has at its call if necessary the Butte County Sheriff and his organization who reside less than twenty road miles away. The park does and will maintain a rescue cache capable of outfitting a six-man team during the main visitor season with the necessary equipment to effect a search and rescue operation anywhere within the boundaries of the monument.

Fire Management

Natural fires are essential to the maintenance of ecological communities of mixed successional stages. Unless lightning caused fires periodically sweep over portions of the vegetative cover, original conditions will be altered. The value of the Monument as a natural ecological research unit will be simultaneously negated.

The vegetation at Craters of the Moon is sparse. Approximately two thirds of the total area is barren lava. Islands of vegetation sit at right angles to prevailing winds and are well protected by natural fire-breaks. relatively

few fires occur with the average being about one fire every three years. It is not uncommon to find isolated Limber Pine trees which have been ignited by lightning, then ceased burning for lack of adjacent combustible material.

Man-caused fires, or any fires which threaten major portions of the landscape, developed facilities, or neighboring land outside the monument, shall be extinguished. Natural caused fires of moderate size which will burn themselves out against lava barriers shall be kept under surveillance, but extinguished only when compelling reasons demand.

Future Use--Trends and Carrying Capacity

Even with the designation of Wilderness for most of the area in 1970, there has been only a slight increase each year in backcountry use at Craters of the Moon. It is expected that use will continue to increase, but not at any significant rate. This reasoning is based on two assumptions: (1) The hostile environment that one must endure when traveling in the backcountry at Craters of the Moon and the lack of varied activities to choose from once one is visiting it (fairly well confined to walking and exploring only). (2) Recreation areas and National Forest lands nearby that offer much more to the visitor (depending how you look at it) along the lines of scenery and outdoor recreation than the Craters can.

Of the total backcountry, it is the 9 mile area along the rift zone which will most attract visitors. An old road, now being used as a trail extends for

approximately 5 miles to the northwest side of The Sentinel. The heavy use area will be a narrow corridor along the rift with the bulk of the use lying between the trail head and The Sentinel. Of the overnight users, few normally camp, or probably will in the future camp beyond The Sentinel. However, a small percentage of them will day hike beyond this point—mainly toward the Fissure Butte vicinity. Probably not more than a handful, if any, in most years reach down into the Vermillion Chasm area near the southeastern corner of the monument.

Any carrying capacity figures devised for the backcountry will in most cases have to be based on the narrow corridor mentioned above as this is the main travel route for both day and overnight users. Most activities, including camping will take place near or along the fringes of this rift zone. Consideration must also be given to the impact on the adjacent pa hoo hoe lava flows whose delicate crust can easily crumble underfoot.

A realistic carrying capacity figure can be arrived at only by observation during a time of heavy use and will not be attempted at this time. The delicate nature of the resource and the openness of the terrain, which readily reveals the presence of others, should be primary considerations when the decision is made.

2. Interpretive Prospectus

Development of guidelines for the interpretive program would be provided in an interpretive prospectus. There has been no recent prospectus done on Craters of the Moon, but one has been requested. Recent contacts with Harpers Ferry seem to indicate that funds are available to start preparing a prospectus for the park this fiscal year—providing the park can produce enough justification. We presently are attempting to convince them that there is. If the study is approved, then a prospectus should be started as soon as possible after the research of the U.S.G.S. team currently doing studies in this area is complete. This study should be completed in 1980 and because the emphasis at Craters of the Moon is on the geologic story, it should provide a great amount of pertinent information upon which to base a prospectus.

3. Interpretive Facilities

The interpretive facilities at Craters of the Moon range from excellent to poor. Of these, the visitor center, which receives approximately one-third of all visitors entering the monument, is by far the most important. The size of the visitor center is adequate for most visitor use. The arrival of buses or other large groups, however, proves the area much too small. A possible expansion of the visitor center to accommodate these groups and future increases in visitor usage is something that should be considered in future planning. The exhibit room within the visitor center constitutes one of the major, and sometimes only, interpretive contacts with many visitors. Because of this, every effort should be made to update and utilize this exhibit. To accomplish this the following measures are needed:

- a. Some of the exhibits need to be refurbished.
- b. The exhibits are pre-Apollo and a correlation between the Earth's and the Moon's surface should now be included in the exhibit.
- c. Some of the geological information contained in the exhibit is now questionable and after U.S.G.S. publishes their current study, this information should be updated.
- d. The astronaut's visit to the monument in 1969 interests many visitors and should possibly be included in the exhibits.
- e. A look should be taken at using the exhibits to encourage the visitor to explore more of the monument.

A concerted effort along with additional funding would be required to bring the exhibit up to a proper level.

Roadside exhibits have recently been upgraded. Those exhibits which have not received upgrading should have this done as soon as possible. Further expansion of these exhibits is not deemed necessary at this time.

Interpretive signing represents several different stages of development. Recent additions of modular fiberglass signs have upgraded the system. These signs, however, are interspersed in some areas with a different type of sign (usually metal). An attempt should be made to arrive at a more uniform sign system. Wood signs are still used in some areas and will be replaced whenever possible. There has been some problems with the fiberglass pulling away from the wood backings on the modular type of signs. Hopefully, a metal edging applied this winter will correct the problem. One other problem that exists is that recent geological findings have outdated some of the information on various signs. An attempt will be made to update these as soon as possible.

The outdoor amphitheater in the campground currently meets the needs of the interpretive program. The screen and equipment housing is deteriorating and will require replacement in the next few years. The possibility of constructing a more durable structure should be considered at this time. Seating is adequate but will also require refurbishing in the near future. Lighting in the area is poor in places and steps will be taken to alleviate this problem next season. The electrical system caused some problems during the previous season and upgrading the system will be looked into this coming year.

Current trail usage is not felt to have reached capacity and the overall trail system is considered to be excellent as far as interpretive value is concerned. Any interpretive prospectus should take future development of the existing trails and of additional trails into consideration.

4. Interpretive Planning

In determining the most effective interpretive program to provide visitors, the major weakness of the present program is visitor participation. There is always a demand for interpretive activities, but the effectiveness would be much greater if a larger portion of the monument's visitors could benefit from the various programs. Built-in drawbacks such as short stays and late arrival times will always exist, but it is believed that measures can be taken to reduce the effect of this type of visitor use.

Plans are being made for next season that would tailor the interpretive program to better fit visitor needs and to make them more knowledgeable on what is available. Measures that may accomplish this are:

- a. Scheduling of interpretive programs to appeal to visitors who have a limited period of time to spend in the area.
- b. Scheduling interpretive programs to coincide with the time of the day in which the majority of the visitors are in the monument.
- c. Scheduling more specialized programs during periods when a known visitor demand exists.
- d. Placing more emphasis on supplying interpretive programs at areas where visitor interest focuses.
- e. Stimulating visitor interest in the monument and in attending interpretive activities.

It is believed that these schedule changes can be put into operation without undue difficulty. The present seasonal staff of four park technicians should be adequate to handle this program. The stimulation of visitor interest will be accomplished by the interpretive staff and in a series of pamphlets that are to be produced on the most important features of the monument.

Overall, it is felt that if these improvements can be brought about, the interpretive program will benefit by being more effective and by reaching more monument visitors.

H. ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION

Environmental Education and contact with the local schools has decreased in the last few years. Local schools have some reservations on the program and have not demonstrated a large desire to interact with the Park Service. Currently, we are trying to formulate a program in the local schools that will allow us to present a series of programs on a continual basis. In the future, this may be expanded to include other schools in more distant communities. However, travel restrictions and available personnel limit the possible extent of these programs.

A high utilization of the monument's film library by local schools does provide one means of contact with the local community. A continuing attempt is being made to upgrade this library and to further encourage this program.